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ABSTRACT

The survey from which the implications for the teaching of freshman English were derived was designed to uncover information about the present status of the composition and freshman English requirements around the country. Seven hundred questionnaires were sent out and 491 were returned, a 70 percent response. Some of the implications of the study are that college English and composition teachers need to be more aware of what is happening around the country, on their own campuses, and in the teaching of composition; to become more involved in the standards that are and will be used at their own schools; and to develop a more effective and efficient network of information input and retrieval. (RB)

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Implications of the Results of a Nationwide Survey for the Teaching of Freshman English

Ron Smith

If you'll permit me the liberty of vernacular which equips its users so much the better for the arena but by which I am supposed, professionally, to be horrified, I will begin with some figures. I don't wish merely to present them to you, though. That would be to invite you to miss the point altogether. What I want to do, you see, hence the vernacular, is lay the figures on you. As a believer in the trowel being mightier than either sword or pen, I just know that having had the figures laid on you you'll be ever so much likelier to do something with them. And that is the point.

The figures I refer to are some of those I arrived at the result of a nationwide survey of four-year colleges and universities taken during Fall 1973. The survey, commissioned by Edward P. J. Corbett, editor of College Composition and Communication, was designed to uncover information about the present status of the composition requirement and Freshman English around the country. 700 questionnaires were sent out and 491 were returned, completed, by respondents, a healthy 70% response. This is neither the place nor the proper time to go extensively into the figures (my full report was the lead article in the May 1974 issue of College Composition and Communication), but a brief "laying on" of some of the figures will help make clear the implications I see for the teaching of Freshman English, which is my present subject.

To begin with, at only 45% of all schools surveyed are there at present composition requirements of two or more courses. Just seven years ago, according

to Thomas Wilcox in his A Comprehensive Survey of Undergraduate Programs in English in the United States, freshmen were required at 77.8% of all schools to take two terms of English. That's a drop, since 1967, of 32.8%. Further, while in 1967 at 93.2% of all schools freshmen were required to take at least one term of English, now only 76% of all schools have a composition requirement of one course or more, a drop of 17.2%. In case you missed the all important obverse side of that coin, at 24% of all schools surveyed there is now no composition requirement as such compared presumably to 6.8% seven years ago.

Although you're probably already conjuring up some apt implications for the teaching of Freshman English on your own, let me continue "laying the figures on you."

It is true that private schools are involved most in the changed figures thus far. However, from 43% of all state schools in the survey come reports of pressures for change of one sort and another, most of them to lower the requirement, eliminate it altogether, or increase the number of exemptions from it. 25% of private schools, where change has already been greatest, are, on the other hand, experiencing such pressures. Pressures to increase the number of exemptions permitted or to make use of different forms of exemption were the kinds most frequently noted by respondents. It is therefore no surprise to note that at 41% of those schools where there is a composition requirement respondents estimated that at their schools more students would be exempted during the 1973-74 academic year than were exempted during the 1970-71 year. Also, 33% of all respondents in the survey noted that fewer students in their 1974 graduating classes will have completed the composition requirement with coursework alone than did so in 1971.

Whether or not we care to admit it, then, enough change has in recent years affected enough composition programs and enough students around the country to make it apparent that the time is at hand to consider any implications that might exist

for the teaching of Freshman English. Whatever was the role of Freshman English teachers during the halcyon days of unyielding programs, it is no longer a role determined alone by teachers of composition or by their departments. It is instead a role often dictated by external pressures and factors that just a few short years ago were relatively unknown or, if they were, were relatively isolated rather than widespread as they are today. These changes, now inspired around the country much more obviously by budgetary problems and the need to find and retain students than they were only three years ago, have affected, among other things, lower division curricula, the nature of the word "requirement" itself, student-teacher ratios, and the attitudes of students. Almost needless to say, everyone who now teaches Freshman English, or any required composition course for that matter, is involved like it or not--if only for the reason that flamboyant and money-saving change elsewhere can make the more traditional and costly programs conspicuous for their extravagance in the eyes of administrators. That, in case you have yet to find it out, is the stuff of disaster for programs.

I have no special desire to seem an alarmist, but I do know that a good deal of the change that has gone on appears to be working out, at least to the satisfaction of those affected by it. There were a number of reports by respondents of success where somewhat radical change has taken place--like eliminating the composition requirement entirely and replacing it with composition electives that have turned out to be popular with students. While I do not preach that this kind of change is desirable or even necessary, I want to see avoided the kinds of calamities I have experienced and have been told about by respondents. There just isn't any need for them.

A first implication, then, of the results of the survey for the teaching of Freshman English would have to be, I should think, that we be aware, as teachers of composition, of the changes that are occurring in higher education, on our own

campuses, and in our own field. If we aren't, we will be made to be aware, probably too late. It's that simple. These are, for a great many schools, as near to being cutthroat and desperate times as have existed in the Twentieth Century. Some schools are closing, others are struggling, and a tremendous number of them are working harder than ever to keep enrollments up. Many, perhaps too many, are tinkering with their lower division course arrangements in an effort to make them attractive to entering and continuing students alike. Many schools are now offering credit by equivalency examination on scales that six years ago wouldn't have seemed likely at all. The word "requirement" has been altered and even dropped, in fact, and as a result the old monolithic design of a Freshman English program has begun to disappear. It is indeed a "new ball game" these days, and as teachers of composition we have to keep up with what the newest ground rules are today where we draw our checks as well as keep one, at least, of two eyes directed toward what those ground rules might be tomorrow.

Of course, I know I'm talking to a group of professionals who are probably among the best informed, not the least. The very fact that you're attending this convention indicates as much to me. It is my sincere hope, though, that you will have better luck in taking with you to home base what I've said and am about to say.than one person did last year. A few of you may recall that at last year's convention in New Orleans I spoke on the symptoms of demise in Freshman English programs and how to recognize them. One respondent in the survey wrote on the back of the questionnaire returned to me that she had heard my talk and had recognized in what I said much of what was the situation at her school, thinking as she listened of how she would inform her colleagues at home. Well, she left New Orleans with "the word" clutched to bosom, told all to her colleagues at home, and was not believed. Soon after, she reports, the composition requirement was done away with at her school.

I relate that to you not because I think it such a calamity that a composition program should die; I've already said I've been informed of some good outcomes in situations where requirements have been done away with. The calamity is that the death of a program should be imposed from without while the people within, knowing too little of the tendencies of the times, could do nothing but clutch at what they had as the best of all possible alternatives. Nowadays it is not feasible to cling to <u>any</u> alternative without knowing the practical consequences of doing so and, more important, without proof that the one alternative chosen is the better one. Those who haven't been keeping right up to date are not likely to know anything of consequences or proof.

A second implication concerns knowledge of the school's standards. It is a fact derived from the survey that 68% of all schools where there is a composition requirement exempt some students from that requirement. Since only 76% of all schools in the survey sample have composition requirements, 68% means that almost all schools now exempt some students from the requirement. Other figures uncovered in the survey reveal that there is a tendency among many schools to exempt greater numbers of students now than in the recent past. As a small example, 41% of the group that exempts some students estimated that more students would be exempted during the 1973-74 academic year than were exempted in 1970-71. There is a complex lesson inherent in these figures, it seems to me. Where a school exempts students from the composition requirement, it does so while telling others they must fulfill the requirement with coursework. The more students exempted, the more reason there is to believe that students who must fulfill their writing requirement with coursework should not be expected to linger in the composition program for any longer a period of time than fulfillment means and to attain any higher a grade level of performance than the bottom level of the exempt group can write to. In other words, where exemptions are now permitted moreso than in the past, students who fulfill

their composition requirement with coursework should be allowed graduation from the requirement at that point where their writing ability matches the writing of those students who are in the bottom group of those who have been exempted. Students deserve equal treatment and schools, in a great many cases, need cost efficiency in the composition program. What is more, there is a large question concerning what the course content of required composition courses should be where students have been exempted on the basis of competency, performance, and/or equivalency testing in composition. Is it fair, for instance, to incorporate humanities content in such courses where skill in writing is the objective--especially where measurement of skill in writing was the only determinant in the exempting process?

There ought to be a few among you who are by now objecting to my "hokey" logic. Possibly those of you who are from schools where more than, say, 10% of entering students are exempted each year feel that the lower level of cutoff at your school reflects a poor standard that you as professionals do not agree with. What makes the ball game most evidently a different one these days is just such an externally imposed standard as might be obvious in scores at which students are given exemption from requirements, for instance the composition one. If you disagree with that standard, find out how you can go about having it changed, but surely you're not going to hold some students to a higher standard than the standard that exists in the realm of exemptions, are you? Doing so can well be the cause of criticism outside the program, as it has been according to survey respondents, and it is surely the way to have the requirement reduced or eliminated without having much say when it is--this also according to reports from respondents. It is today essential that the standard adhered to within composition programs be the same as those employed by schools in their exempting procedures.

I fully recognize it is no secret that with the budget a problem at many schools, standards <u>are</u> a question at present. Here is where I think the third

implication of the survey's results applies, for if standards in composition are being compromised by a push for more exemptions and reduced requirements, I for one cannot help but put the blame squarely in the hands of people like you and me, people in composition. It is evident to me that we need a more efficient and effective network of information input and retrieval within our professional specialty, college composition. After having lived with 491 completed survey questionnaires as long as I have, I've come to the conclusion--albeit based on scant evidence of any concrete sort--that at far too many schools where change has come about it was actually by something close to, if not really, surprise. That conclusion pertains in particular to the way exemptions have increased in just four years' time without, to cite one detail among many, much word being available about the reliability of equivalency tests (like the CLEP) as far as composition teachers are concerned. From respondents I heard plenty relative to how some were not happy with score levels chosen as cutoffs, but it was startling to find that many respondents knew little or nothing about CLEP, which has swept from no usage in 1970 to being accepted in lieu of part or all of the composition requirement at 45% of all schools in the survey sample. Must we always rely on a primitive grape vine, a voice in the wind once in a while at conventions, and arthritic ache to forewarn us of danger, better yet to aprise us of what will enable us to be collectively prepared for whatever new onslaughts lie ahead? How quickly Boards of Regents and college administrations discovered CLEP in their hour of need, how smoothly they found out how to streamline the lower division to attract and retain students, and how easily they have eased student-teacher ratios upward! Why weren't we there with impeccable defenses to match the brilliant offensives at times when great walls have toppled? (I should say "toppled elsewhere," since that may well be the clue to why we weren't. "Elsewhere" doesn't necessarily scare us into action.)

If there is indeed a problem now of standards violation and a waning away

of the composition requirement, it must be, I think, the hangover stage after the drunk many of us knew to be vogue a few years ago. That was the time when composition was looked down upon by those composition teachers who were looking upward to the days of prettier teaching loads. That was the time when too few college English teachers had time to bother with being aware other than in their own narrow specialties, specialties that were surely other than composition. Now we must communally suffer the hangover, with the headache increasing daily rather than decreasing. A projection drawn from the survey's results, based largely on percentages of schools experiencing pressures for change of the kinds we've noted here, is that there will be more and more schools reducing their composition requirements, more even eliminating them, and certainly a great many more increasing the number of exemptions permitted.

To reiterate, though, there is some good and some bad in what we've seen of the survey's results. Going from a composition requirement to none does not always imply declining standards or cataclysmic reversal. With planning and sound principles behind such changes, successful transition from forced feeding of students to students intelligently feeding themselves can and has been achieved. We need to hear a great deal more about the successes and failures from those who have lived them, however. Too many of us want to know how to handle the problems as they arise and at present don't. Likewise, there need be no significant loss in reducing the composition requirement from a noble number of credit hours to an ignoble number. If we are forced by the change to lower our standards, there could be, but if we are instead forced to achieve a similar standard with greater economy, so much the better. Then, too, a greater number of exemptions need be no sign of loose standards if we composition teachers have important roles in determining how and through what means more exemptions are to come about.

To reiterate further, though, we all know without looking any more deeply

than we have into the survey's results and comments by respondents that, sadly, thoughtful and wise change is not what we've gotten in too many cases. There are wild stories to tell. At a few too many schools students are not writing and are not getting any help they don't even know they need; there is no check at all built into some of the changes that have come about. Adequate advisement has not replaced requirements in some instances. And worst of all, the spread of these changes seems often to be promoted through the highest reaches of hierarchies in academia, one school's dropping of a requirement leading to another's through channels of information we in composition are not necessarily privy to.

If there is a message in all of this, then, it is certainly not to go independently poking fingers into individual holes in a great many dikes. The implications of the survey that I've pointed out are just a few: (1) being aware in all the ways we can of what's going on around the country, on our own campuses, and in the teaching of composition; (2) becoming involved in the nature of the standards that are and will be employed at our own schools; and (3) developing a more efficient and effective network of information input and retrieval, which will involve all of us as contributors at various times. Change and tight budgets are more than likely here for a while to come in higher education. There's no use fighting it blindly and there's no use submitting weakly. If there's one broad implication of the survey's results for the teaching of Freshman English, in fact, it's that it's high time we knew what to do as a very large and still important group of educators. This is a computer-age phenomenon we're witnessing. Let's not be caught standing around like so many Miniver Cheevys.